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Equality: As A Social Principle Described In Vedic Tradition

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"Equality by birth and gender equality are the two cardinal Vedic norms"

Background: Equality as a social principle Sociologist typically writes about inequality, not equality. Evidence of the extent and persistence of social inequality is so pervasive in contemporary capitalism that inequality appears to be a rather obvious area for research and discussion.[1] When social equality does not prevail in society it results in many types of inequalities. Concept of equality is mainly referred to in the context of the disparities created by the caste system. Social inequality is manifested in a number of ways. The rich and the poor, landowners and landless labourers, capitalists and workers, educated and uneducated, employed and unemployed, men and women, modern and backward. In addition, there always are 'internal' inequalities among the rich, as also among the workers at various strata and the farmers at various levels. Thus we find that the modern society is totally surrounded by the thoughts of inequality, which includes the problem of social inequality, caste inequality, gender inequality, racial inequality etc.

The terms "equality" (Gr. isotes, Lat. aequitas, aequalitas, Fr. égalité, Ger. Gleichheit) signifies a qualitative relationship. 'Equality' (or 'equal') signifies correspondence between groups of different objects, persons, processes or circumstances that have the same qualities in at least one respect, but not all respects, i.e., regarding one specific feature, with differences in other features. 'Equality' needs to be thus distinguished from 'identity' — this concept signifying that one and the same object corresponds to itself in all its features: an object that can be referred to through various individual terms, proper names, or descriptions. In the modern society equality means the social state of affairs in which all people within a specific society or isolated group have the same status in a certain respect. At the very least, social equality includes equal rights under the law, such as security, voting rights, freedom of speech and assembly, the extent of property rights, and equal access to social goods and services. However, it also includes concepts of economic equity, i.e. access to education, health care and other social

1 Turner Bryan, Equality, p. 17

securities. It also includes equal opportunities and obligations, and therefore involves the whole of society.

The concept of 'equality' is not as simple as it appears. The meaning which we attribute to it belongs to very recent times. There is no society anywhere in the world where all individuals are 'equal' in all respect. Say, for example, a nation succeeds in bringing about one hundred percent pure equality in its society; even then the equal people of that nation are going to be at unequal level compared to people in the other nations. Not only in this area but there are also many other causes which creates discrimination in the society and results in the form of inequality. This inequality is becoming more and more dominant and pervasive in the today's society. From this it becomes clear that inequality is the most serious and pressing problem in front of the whole world. From Time to time many acts and amendments were made to solve this problem of inequality but all the attempts seems to be failure. Whole world is trying to solve the problem of inequality and to establish the principal of Equality (social principle), but they are not getting the idea.

One of the most recent examples of the inequality can be seen at the time of Tsunami in January 2005. At the time of the distribution of the food and water provided by UNICEF in Tamilnadu, it was reported that the Dalits were not allowed to take these things and were thrown out of relief camps. What is the main reason behind this? Is this happening due to lack of rules? Not only this but the main cause behind this is the ignorance of Vedas, this centuries old inequality can be removed only when the common people are made aware of the Vedic views which command of all types of equality. Indian express editorially (8^{th} January, 2005) called to crack down on those who discriminate against Dalits in the relief operations. Hindustan times also in its editorial captioned, "out caste" (8^{th} January, 2005) has rightly and force fully argued- "In Nagapattinam alone, 32 families of Dalits have not only been told to fend themselves but have also been shooed away from using basic amenities lest they 'contaminate'. For too long, we have come to accept the 'necessary evil' of casteism in our country. This is reality and we should have to understand if we want to understand India, whether it be our politics or society. As the Nagapattinam phenomenon only highlights for such a forced division among our own people takes place every day in various places. Caste barriers are not sociological necessities, but societal evils that need to be demolished, if needed be by force." This social evil can be permanently dismantled by only with the wider dissemination of Vedic richas.

Social Equality in Vedas:

Vedas are the one which consists in itself the solution of all these problems of inequality related with the society. Because Vedas are those books of Indian culture

which have stored in themselves the knowledge related to all subjects. In common parlance Veda means ‘knowledge’. In fact, knowledge is that light which destroys darkness of ignorance in the human mind. The Vedas are called such a source of history which is an infinite storehouse of legendary knowledge and science. The word ‘Veda’ is formed out of ‘vid’ of Sanskrit, i.e. in this one word all kinds of knowledge is inherent. Ancient Indian Rishis knew, understood, mantras. They collected, compiled, and presented them before the world under the title ‘Vedas’. The Vedas are the backbone of the Indian culture. They contain remadies of word off the harm, and the ways to attain what you want. As in other field one has to work hard, study this compiled knowledge to take out the jewels from the Vedas.[2]

Many scholars have expressed as to what the Vedas means to them. According to Manu, “All religions are based on the Vedas.” And to Vivekanand, “the Vedas are divine knowledge”. Maharshi Dayanand says “the Vedas contain essence of all known forms of knowledge.” They are the supreme religious scriptures of the Hindus. All others (Brahamanas, Upanisads, smrities, sutras etc.) are just commentaries on Vedas by individuals, explanations and poets imaginations i.e., these are secondary sources. All these secondary source themselves acknowledge the supremacy of Vedas. Manusmriti confirms that the supreme authority of law is the shruti i.e. Vedas. Apastamba Dharmasutra (1.1) states that Vedas alone are the authority for law and Gautam Dharmasutra (1.3) also admits that Vedas are source of the sacred law. Maharshi Ved Vyasa, himself has laid down that-

श्रुतिस्मृतिपुराणानां विरोधो यत्र दृश्यते ।
तत्र श्रौतं प्रमाणन्तु तयोर्द्वैधे स्मृतिर्त्ववरा ॥[3]

“whenever there is conflict between what is declared in the Vedas and provisions in any of the smritis, puranas, etc. what is declared in the Vedas shall prevail”. Thus the supremacy of the Vedas is proved. Whatever is mentioned in the Vedas is as the evidence and we should have to accept it.

When we specially talk about the Equality we find that the Vedas speak highly of equality and brotherhood- “**वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्**”. "The entire world is a family" was the motto of Vedic civilization. All had equal opportunity in all walks of life in Vedic civilization. As said: “**सं गच्छध्वं सं वदध्वं....... ॥**”(RV:X.191.2). There are many

2 Paliwal, B.B., Message of the Vedas, p.8
3 Mahabharata, 1.5.4

Vedic richas which command equality of all by birth and unity and harmony among them- "समानो मन्त्रः समितिः समानी ॥" (RV: X.191.3)

After discussing the concept of equality, inequality, problems of inequality, now coming to the main point that how Vedas are also helpful in diminishing the major social evils such as caste inequality and gender inequality etc.

Does the varna system treat human beings unequally, with the brahmins at the top of the hierarchy and the Sudras at the bottom? This is a common observation about the system which is based on the modern caste system. But when we go through the Vedas we found that there is no any type of caste discrimination and no concept of untouchbility etc. Varna vyavastha (literally, the class system) remains one of the most interesting and debatable topics in the study of Vedic culture. [4]As mentioned in the 90th chapter of the Rigveda, which is known as Purusha Sukta (X.90). Purana generally means a healthy and strong male human being, or the supreme god. The very concepts of castes by birth, upper and lower castes, superior and inferior castes, outcastes untouchables, dalits etc. are not sanctioned by Rigveda, Valmikiya Ramayana or by Srimad Bhagvadgita. Protagonists of caste by birth cite in particular the Purusha sukta (X.90.12) of Rigveda and shlokas (IV.13) and (X.VIII.41) of Shrimad Bhagavadgita. This claim totally fizzles out if one looks closely in to these keeping in mind other richas of Rigveda and other shlokas of Gita.

There is no caste system in Rigveda becomes apparent from the simple fact that names of none of the Rigvedic rishis carry any of the present day caste like Pandita, Sharma, Tripathi, chturvedi, trivedi, dvivedi, singh, Chatterjee, mukherjee, Rao, gupta etc. According to Jawaharlal Nehru, the caste among Hindus had developed (i.e., acquired rigidity) after the muslim invasions.

As a devil this caste system is described in details in the English translation. HH Wilson translates this shloka of RV-

यत्पुरुषं व्यदधुः कतिधा व्यकल्पयन् ।
मुखं किमस्य कौ बाहू का ऊरू पादा उच्येते ॥[5]

"When they immolated Purusha, in to how many parts did they divide him? What was his mouth called what his arms, what his thighs, what were his feet called?" T.H. Griffith translates: "When they divided Purusha how many portions did they make? What do they call to his thighs and feet? One may note that both the

4 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, The Hindu View of Life, p. 25 -30
5 RV, X.90.11

translators have used verb ‘called’. They have not translated it as to who was born from mouth, arms, thighs and from feet.

ब्राह्मणोऽस्य मुखमासीद् बाहू राजन्यः कृतः।
ऊरू तदस्य यद्वैश्यः पद्भ्यां शूद्रो अजायत॥ [6]

This Rigvedic richa is translated by H.H Wilson in this sense “His mouth became the Brahamana, his arms became the Ranjya, his thighs became the Vaishya and the Shudra was born from his feet”. Griffith translates, “The Brahamana was his mouth; of both his arms Ranjya was made. His thighs became Vaishya; from his feet the shudra was produced. Here this thing is carefully notable that these famous translators, do not state that the first three were born from such and such a part of body of Purusha. To represent something symbolically, and to be born from that part or thing are the different thing not identical.[7]

Some greedy priests concocted a hypothesis in Manusmriti that Brahmana was born from the mouth of the Purusha, so he was the superior most and the Shudra was born from the feet of the Purusha , which is supposedly the impure part of the body, so Shudra was impure and the inferior most. Then question arises how could the feet of God be impure for we mortals? Neither Wilson nor Griffith attests this ‘birth’ concotation.

Shloka of Manusmriti is often quoted to claim that organs of human body above navel are sacred and those below are impure (apavitra).[8] But when go through the text of Rigveda there is no sanction for such a hypothesis in the Rigveda. Such a interpretation is totally false as its translation by George Buhler reads: “All those cavities which lie above the naval are pure and those which are below the navel are impure.” This interpretation shows that there is great difference between a cavity in a body and a part or a organ of a body. This type of mischief is done by the castiest lobby.

Foolishness of such interpretation of shloka becomes clearer if one asks a simple question …are the two cavities of nose sacred being above the navel, if so, whether secretions from these are also sacred? The correct thing is that all the cavities in the human body are equally important and equally useful to remain healthy. If any cavity in human body, specially the lower ones get blocked or removed that person becomes sick and dies. Vedic Rishis revealed the fact that human society is like the human body. Just as the human body is healthy and strong

6 RV, X.90.12
7 Gupta., O.P., Vedic equality and Hinduism, p.45
8 Manusmriti, V.132

only if all the four parts of the body are joined together and function in harmony with each other, similarly a human society will be strong only if all the four professions, classes are joined function in harmony with each other. In the same, if Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra are separated that samaja also get killed or get subjugated. So to make a healthy society harmony among the four varnas is necessary. Thus it becomes clear that equality, perfect unity and complimentarily of all the four classes of the people in order to make a Society strong and powerful is too much necessary.

Thus, Purusha sukta commands that none of the four professions in a healthy society is inferior or superior to other, and each is dependent on the other for its healthy survival. Those who (opposite interpreters of the Purusha sukta) say that as Shudra (professionals/ service class) represent the feet of the Virata Purusha, and, as feet are impure, so Sudras are impure should know that this Richa of RV-

नाभ्या आसीदन्तरिक्षं शीर्ष्णो द्यौः समवर्तत।
पद्भ्यां भूमिर्दिशः श्रोत्रात् तथा लोकाँ अकल्पयन्॥[9]

says that the earth was also born from the same feet of the Purusha. So, will they leave this earth on the same analogy of earth being an impure place. Based on this richa, Sudras will justified that the whole earth as exclusively theirs. It is a notable fact that whenever we worship, we always place our heads at the feet of god in any temple, so how can anyone say that Shudra representing the same feet of god is impure and untouchable? Rigveda (X.90.11&12) preaches that harmony among the four Varnas is essential. In Rigveda, profession or caste is not by birth, not hereditary, but by training and education (karma/ efforts/). This it becomes more lucid from this richa of Rigveda:

अहमेव स्वयमिदं वदामि जुष्टं देवेभिरुत मानुषेभिः।
यं कामये तं तमुग्रं कृणोमि तं ब्रह्माणं तमृषिं तं सुमेधाम्॥[10]

Actually in ancient india there were four varnas: brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and sudra. The basic idea was division of labor in the society. Brahmin was defined as 'Brahma nayati iti brAhmaNa'. People who preached spiritual teachings to the society and lived spiritual lives were called brahmins. Kshatriya was defined 'akShIyate trAyate iti kShatriya'. These were the people who protected the society against external attacks and maintained internal order. Vaishya was defined as 'विषति इति विषयः'. Businessmen, traders and farmers came under this category.

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9 RV, 90.14
10 RV, X.125.5

Shudras were the people engaged in services. Carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers, porters etc., fell under this category. This system ensured that the religious, political, financial and physical powers were all separated into four different social classes.

In the beginning, there was only one varna in the ancient Indian society. "We were all brahmins or all sudras," says Brihadaranyaka Upanisad (1.4, 11-5, 1. 31) and also Mahabharata (12.188). A smriti text says that one is born a sudra, and through purification he becomes a brahmin. According to Bhagavad Gita, varna is conferred on the basis of the intrinsic nature of an individual, which is a combination of three gunas (qualities): sattva, rajas, and tamas.[11]

In the Mahabharata Shanti Parva, Yudhishthira defines a brahmana as one who is truthful, forgiving, and kind. He clearly points out that a brahmin is not a brahmin just because he is born in a brahmin family, nor is a sudra a sudra because his parents are s\dras. The same concept is mentioned in Manu Smrti. Another scripture Apastamba Dharmasutra states that by birth every human being is a sudra. It is by education and upbringing that one becomes 'twice born', that is, a dvija. So no birth based caste system was there. Thus in this way Veda says equality by birth and to them no one is inferior or superior all human are equal by birth.

Veda also has the solution of the Gender inequality. Gender equality, equality between men and women, entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations. Gender equality means that the different behaviour and aspirations and needs of men and women are considered valued and favoured equally. It means fairness of treatment of men and women according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.[12] Vedas also speaks of this type of gender equality. They do not discriminate against women. There is no gender bias in Vedas. Rigvedic richas were revealed to over 414 rishis out of which, twenty nine are ladies rishikas implying gender equality. Women were neither discriminated in matters of religion and education nor were prevented from gaining excellence in the society. Presence of so many rishikas in Rigveda proves that Almighty God Himself considered woman fit enough, qualified and elegible to receive divine revelations. Therefore, women have equal claim over the Vedas. If God Himself did not discriminate women in matters of religion, then how could any else or we?

11 |rimad Bhagavadgita IV.13
12 ABC of Woman worker's Right And Gender Equality ILO,Geneva, 2000,p.48.

One who closely and seriously goes through the texts of Rigveda (X.191), Atharveda (III.30), Yajurveda (26.02) etc. will notice that there is no gender discrimination. No exclusion of women in any field. The Vedic richas talk of Sam no mantra, **'समानं मनः, समानं मन्त्रमभि मन्त्रये'** for all, not excluding women. Yajurveda enjoins imparting Vedic education to all, not excluding women:

यथेमां वाचं कल्याणीमावदानि जनेभ्यः।
ब्रह्मराजन्याभ्या ँ शूद्राय चार्याय च स्वाय चारणाय च।
प्रियो देवानां दक्षिणायै दातुरिह भूयासमयम् मे
कामः समृध्यतामुप मादो नमतु॥ [13]

Atharvaveda expressly sanctions study of the Vedas by girls/women: **"ब्रह्मचर्येण कन्या, युवानं विन्दते पतिं"** ॥[14] Thus we find that gender equality is also the cardinal norm of the Vedas.

Thus, it becomes lucid that higher caste and lower caste, untouchability, gender problems etc are in open and direct contradictions in the Vedas. Unity in diversity is the famous Hindu motto. Cows of different colours like black, red and spotted ones give same white milk in RV (VIII.93.13). It is a metaphor used in the Vedas for unity in diversity: the pillar of modern Indian state. There are number of Vedic richas which speaks of all types equality. This richa prays "Unite the strength of us Men here, like the chariot –wheel and reins."

कृधी नो अह्नयो देवः सवितः स च स्तुषे मघोनाम् ।
सहो न इन्द्रो वह्निभिन्यैषां चर्षणीनां चक्रं रश्मिं न योयुवे॥ [15]

The well known Samgyana sukta of the Rigveda describes the fundamenatal strands of the socialist ideology and principles of unity. The richa says, "go together, talk together, let your minds apprehend alike: in like manner as the ancient gods concurring accepted their portion of the sacrifice."

सं गच्छध्वं सं वदध्वं सं वो मनांसि जानताम् ।
देवा भागं यथा पूर्वे सञ्जानाना उपासते॥ [16]

And says that "common be the prayers of these (assembled worshippers), common be the acquirement, common the purpose, associated be the desire. I repeat for you a common prayer; I offer you a common oblation."

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13 Yaj. 26.02
14 AV.XI.5.18
15 RV, X.93.9
16 RV, X.191.2

समानो मन्त्रः समितिः समानी समानं मनः सह चित्तमेषाम् ।
समानं मन्त्रमभि मन्त्रये वः समानेन वो हविषा जुहोमि ॥ [17]

The Vedas command through union among the people. It becomes clear from this most famous richa of Rigveda:

समानी व आकूतिः समाना हृदयानि वः ।
समानमस्तु वो मनोः यथा वः सुसहासति ॥ [18]

"Common be your intension, common be (the wishes of) your heart, common be your thoughts, so that there may be thorough union among you."

By seeing these richas, it can be said that the Ṛgveda instructs common prayer, common worship and common oblations for all Hindus without any birth-based discrimination among them, and without any gender discrimination too.

To eliminate disunity, which is caused by the different opinions, the Vedas give emphasis to collective thinking. In Atharvaveda is called Samgyana (AV, 3. 30.4, 7). Feeling oneness is the base of equality in Vedic view. When a man feels that the soul lying in his body in the same as lying in others, then he has no enmity with others. The Ishavasyopanishad says, "He who sees all beings in his own self and himself in all beings never hates anybody."

यस्तु सर्वाणि भूतान्यात्मन्नेवानुपश्यति ।
सर्वभूतेषु चात्मानं ततो न विजुगुप्सते ॥ [19]

The concept of Spiritual unity has been illustrated by many stories occurring in the Upanisads. This attitude develops the notion that all persons are alike. The Vedic references illustrate that actually nobody is higher or lower. Society evolves when everybody strives together like brothers for glory and progress.[20]

The Vedas advocate that natural resources should be made available equally to all. The wealthy man should, therefore, utilize his wealth for the welfare of needy people. A request is made to bring out and distribute other richas of those wealthy men, who make no offerings.

समानी प्रपा सह वोऽन्नभागः ॥ [21]

17 RV, X.191.3
18 RV, X.191.4
19 Ishavasyopanishad.6
20 Kumar, Pushpendra, Socialism in Vedic Literature, p. 15
21 AV, 3.30.6

The central command of the famous Vedic richas is that all the Hindus, men and women, are totally equal by birth, share same water and food, worship together united in the same temple, common prayers, common be the purpose, common be oblation, friendly towards each others, etc. One becomes a warrior (kshatriya), Brahmana (educated ones) or rishis, not by birth but by his education, efforts, and training (karma of this life). No one is superior by birth or no one is inferior by birth.

Rigveda attempts to blunt 'class cleavage' by preaching " **समानो मन्त्रः समानो मनः",** common needs, common acquirements, common food etc…". Atharvaveda commands "your drinking saloon be the same, in common your share of food, in the same harness do I join you together; worship you Agni united, like spokes about a navel." Thus all the Hindus have Vedic right of equal and free access to water wells, tanks, food-shops, temples, worshipping, etc.

समानी प्रपा सह वोंऽन्नभागः समाने योक्त्रे सह वो युनज्मि।
सम्यञ्चोऽग्निं सपर्यतारा नाभिमिवाभितः॥[22]

And also preaches "accomplish together moving on, with joint labour." Like Marxism and socialism, Rigveda also calls for collective progress for all that too with joint labour. And also speaks that no one is superior or inferior, all are brothers, and all should strive for the interests of all should progress collectively.

अज्येष्ठासो अकनिष्ठास एते सं भ्रातरो वावृधुः सौभगाय ।
युवा पिता स्वपा रुद्र एषां सुदुघा पृश्निः सुदिना मरुद्भ्यः॥[23]

Thus, find that Vedas speaks of all types of equality and equality by birth and gender equality are the two cardinal Vedic norms, now enshrined in the constitution of India. Let us restore the primacy and supremacy of the Vedas. Let us stop incorrect practice of superseding Vedas by secondary sources or commentaries as the Rishi Vedavyasa has himself instructed that Vedas are supreme and take precedence over everything.[24]

Thus, it can be said that by following the preaching's of the Vedas all types of inequalities (caste inequalities, gender discrimination etc.) can be removed from the society.

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22 AV, 3.30.6
23 RV., V.60.5
24 Mahabharata, 1.5.4